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ABSTRACT

A teacher of elementary school students and father of preschool age children admits his errors and misconceptions concerning child rearing, discusses what he has learned from his children's communicative behavior, and offers suggestions to parents for promoting the growth of children's expressive abilities. (Author/RH)

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A Parental Imperative: Learning From and Fostering Preschoolers' Communicative Behaviors

by

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It all began during the "Flood of '72" when firmly entrenched in my mind was the belief that little children, especially infants, did not care to associate with me. Nor did I especially care to interact with them. They were objects to be admired from afar. So distorted were my feelings toward preschoolers that whenever I would enter a restaurant, I would make sure there were none of these little creatures around to disrupt the serenity of my meal.*

You might say this is a rather strange way for a teacher of elementary children to behave. However, you can take comfort in the knowledge that those were my perceptions of preschoolers, not of older children.

Before entering the nuptial arena with my wife whom I met at the tender age of 29, I had received medical reports from my doctor that fathering children would be very unlikely. With this assurance offered, the scene was set for us to charge through life in a state of bliss and ecstasy unencumbered with children.

Within six weeks of our marriage, my wife was struck with flu-like symptoms. When these conditions persisted, she sought refuge in a doctor's office. Upon being informed of the dismaying results of the visit--pregnancy--my initial reaction was one of extreme lightheadedness. In a span of four and one-half years from our ceremony, we created three little "firecrackers." Thus ended my era of illusionment.

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*At least I did not share the feelings of Cotton Mather, a Puritan moralist of long ago, who referred to children as "infinitely more hateful than vipers."

Being the father of three sparkplugs, I have taken on a vastly different outlook about preschoolers. We know that children learn from their parents but seldom do we look at the opposite end of the scale to determine what we can learn from our children's communicative behavior and how we can promote growth in their expressive abilities. Actions such as reading, writing, listening, talking, drawing and acting can be communicative behaviors. Although some of these thoughts may seem like common sense, they, nonetheless, represent a realistic, condensed version of the complexities of caring for preschoolers.

1. In our society, much attention is devoted to training a person to earn a respectable living. However, there are two major realms in which the American society either fails to adequately prepare us or assumes we are instant experts: marriage and parenting. Not to diminish the importance of marriage, but the focus of this article is on parents. Parenting skills, themselves, may come naturally to some but for most of us, such a notion would be a fallacy. Parenting is a very time consuming process whose chores and responsibilities spell out W-O-R-K. Like any endeavor you want to turn out half decent, it requires methodical planning, both long and short range, and commitment.

2. Children have a natural inclination to explore what is going on in their environment. This is why it is far more economical to channel this curiosity instructively than to rely upon the more expensive commercial items. After riding a ferry boat, our boys built their own vessels out of old scrap materials and played with their creations for hours. One other time, we purchased our preschoolers a set of pots and pans only to discover they preferred playing with old "beat up" ones. It is

important to realize that curiosity can be annoying to parents and dangerous to the child. This is why I stress the word instructive.

Thus, I have become suspicious of the myth that children have short attention spans. Rather, time spent on a task would appear to be a function of their interest.

3. One misconception I had of preschoolers was that they had little of value to say. Now, after a hard work schedule, I sincerely look forward to communicating with my youngsters. In fact, I consider these times to be downright therapeutic. Listening to your children can provide you with many clues toward understanding their thinking and behavior as well as give you some common areas for discussion (even though you think of times they may be automated word factories). In our household, we strive to have a daily "alone time" with each child.

Another important area I realized is that if you go 0 for 5 in a ball game (I call them "sports slumps") or have had a poor day at work, your children will not object. They will love and communicate with you despite your moods over such matters.

4. Communicating words is one unique feature about human beings. I have been absolutely fascinated at the babblings of toddlers and have found it most enjoyable to watch our children's speech pattern evolve. I especially enjoy their animated ways of expressing thoughts. What would appear to be nonsensical muttering is actually the forerunner to effective communication. That is why, as parents, it is extremely important to speak clearly to our children. We need to capitalize upon children's natural interest in communicating by promoting language development through listening, talking, singing, reading, drawing and writing activities.

5. Preschoolers have humorous logic and say funny, even hilarious, things. One time I was attempting to explain the concept "conservation" to our five year old. Having a difficult time making the explanation clear, I said, "I'll explain it when you are eight." Our son looked at me with a smile and declared, "Dad, I'll understand it when I am five!"

In another instance while taking a nature hike, we were teaching our two boys how to identify some common trees. We thought the older boy knew the American beech tree. After walking for some time in the woods, we came upon this tree and asked our son to identify it. Giving the task considerable thought, he proudly proclaimed, "an American ocean (beach)."

On another occasion, it caused his grandparents great delight to hear our three year old dramatically describe how he plucked a handful of cow feed from a "loaf" of hay. Keep a diary of these humorous events and you will have hours of fond memories to share with them in the future.

6. I used to find it very difficult and wasteful to watch children's T.V. shows--but I have changed my thinking. I have learned to appreciate the genius of "Mr. Rogers" because our preschoolers actually interact with him. Admittedly, I am trying to understand the mesmeric qualities that "Daisy and the Duke boys" hold over our youngsters, but they so much enjoy expressing their various forms of animation over a bowl of popcorn.

But T.V. is not an addiction in our home. It is a device from which we can conduct meaningful discussions on the many questions our children ask regarding the "fantasy versus reality" world of T.V. characters. We even conduct career education sessions by explaining the various occupations (such as stuntpeople) associated with putting on a T.V. show.

But let's give equal time to other media-related activities such as music, reading and drawing. The same types of active communication can be generated when we insert these activities in the daily routine of our youngsters. They all love to "read" books, picture magazines, catalogues (toy section), etc., an endeavor I was not especially fond of as a child. They have even gravitated to sometimes doing this by themselves which allows them to be independent.

Drawing and constructing are so vital during these years. I recall one gloomy Sunday afternoon when everyone was "sacked out" but our oldest child who had requested me to draw a bicycle. Drawing is probably one of my least favorite pastimes, but I happily responded. Upon completion of the project, he announced, "Daddy, the bike looks like it is broken!" Now the importance of this shattering experience was not in boosting my ego, but in doing something constructive with him. We had a good laugh about the condition of the bicycle and my skill as an artist.

7. Youngsters need to be taught or showed the correct way to do something. Parents are continually in err by thinking children have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to perform a task. For instance, we wrongly assumed our three year old could unlatch the aluminum screen door to our home. We failed to recognize that such a mechanical skill skated beyond his developmental capabilities.

Because children are not endowed with a great deal of patience, their frustrational level is easily reached. Although reducing the incidence of this behavior is part of the maturation process, it would be helpful if instead of trying to overly challenge children, we provide them with successful experiences.

8. This leads directly to my next point. And that is repetition. Showing your child how to do something once may not be enough. We constantly need to repeat a step by step procedure for opening the screen door knowing he eventually will master this skill. Meanwhile, we exhibit patience by offering him encouragement and praise for every step he performs correctly. Children acquire and implement skills like pieces of a puzzle. As such, they must feel good about every section that is put together.

9. I have been absolutely amazed on numerous occasions at the range and depth of thinking our preschoolers demonstrate. One time I dismissed our youngster's ability to read the pictorial symbols on a rather complex state park map. He began to locate these symbols on the map and tell me their meanings. In another situation, while exploring wild caves, I discovered our two boys could master the names of most cave formations.

Listening comprehension is another surprising area. Few words can we say that our 1½ year old does not understand. While we do not believe in high pressure learning, working with our preschoolers has displaced the notion that little formal academic learning can occur before five years of age.

10. Preschoolers are extremely careless. They simply do not possess the maturity to realize the "cause and effect" consequences of their behavior, nor have they acquired the necessary skills to back up their sometimes daring behavior. However, we do attempt to have our children analyze their behavior by asking them: Is that a safe thing to be doing?

11. That is why, like it or not, children require constant supervision. Even when they are closely watched, accidents will happen with blinding

speed. But, your chances of preventing a serious accident will be greatly increased if you keep a "sharp eye" on the situation. One time while watching our three year old on some playground apparatus, I caught a two year old girl who had plummeted through an opening in the center of the platform. The mother was sitting on a park bench unaware her tyke should have been supervised more closely.

A sound policy to follow is to always think prevention. Do not wait for something serious to happen before you take action. If you sense potential trouble brewing, remove your child or the object from the scene. How many times have you said to yourself, "I knew that was going to happen" or "if only I had moved that item!"

12. Children are great mimics. They can pantomime just about any behavior with great imagination. Our one and a half year old mimics every action the older preschoolers so graciously and freely perform (sometimes a source of consternation). However, at times, the older ones regress in their behavior to accommodate or generate the actions of the younger child. While I am not overly delighted with their antics, I accept it as normal behavior from which they will emerge.

The more important point to remember is that children will mimic parental behavior. I know this is dangerous turf upon which to tread but I have learned this from my youngsters. Thus, the type of personality and/or environment you project at home will "rub off," to some degree, upon your children. One example is to observe how parents react to thunderstorms or insects such as bees. Chances are you will have a good indicator of how their children will react to similar situations.

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One of the major functions of parenthood should be to provide children with a better life while at the same time equipping them with the necessary tools for adequately surviving in the world. It requires absolutely no money to create a warm, loving, understanding environment in support of this goal.

13. To be candid, one of the most difficult and complex aspects of child-rearing is that of discipline. With three preschoolers, rare is the day that one of them does not do something which irritates, annoys or angers me.

What is your natural reaction to these emotions? Let's be honest! To lash out? To employ the "Trash Masher Special?" Maybe to "snatch them bald?" It is a perfectly healthy reaction to feel like responding in this manner but quite different to actually perform the feat. I have found it to be a very unwise and dangerous practice to discipline my children when angry because it is so easy for me, or any adult for that matter, to physically hurt them. Every time you administer discipline with anger, you flirt with confrontation with the Child Abuse Law.

Nor are verbal barrages with derogatory language necessarily helpful for the child in the long run. A child reared on a steady diet of terminology such as "knucklehead," "bonehead," or "stupid" soon begins to feel and act this way. We all behave in a manner which maintains and/or enhances our self-image, even if it is a negative one. Consequently, it may take years to unravel such notions.

In our home, if someone is not thinking too clearly, we may call him a "silly goose." It is a term which puts a "spotlight on the culprit," but is used in an affectionate manner so as not to be ego-damaging.

I am not suggesting "soft-pedaling" discipline. On the contrary, I think parents need a strong set of constructive family standards which are consistently enforced. Consistency, in a positive way, is the key to success. Now let me explain what I mean by "constructive" family standards.

I cannot speak of discipline without both parents being involved (although these suggestions are applicable to single parent families). It is absolutely crucial that parents agree upon a consistent, realistic philosophy toward disciplining their children. Why? Because preschoolers are quick to pick up your discrepancies and play one parent (or adult) against the other, knowingly or unknowingly.

We attempt to administer remediation in a dignified and constructive manner. For instance, our children may be removed from the scene of misbehavior to a "think chair" or "isolation chamber." If we are very angry, this also allows us time to think more clearly about our emotions. Discipline involves disciplining ourselves to use the most appropriate corrective behavior.

If we are "rational" enough, we will explain our disciplinary measures so that they clearly understand the reasons behind our punishment. We also attempt to have a "post-mortem" analysis of the misdeed. In this process, it is essential that some "loving-time" be granted so that our youngsters understand we still love them but disapprove of their errant or careless behavior.

Because children are so ego-centered at this age, many domestic squabbles will erupt. Consequently, we have a humorous, but serious, way of analyzing the need for intervention. It goes like this:

Child in Command (CIC)
Child in Distress (CID)
Parent in Distress (PID)
Parent in Command (PIC)

When CIC is in effect, your child (or someone else's) is using theatrical behavior to gain some tangible reward. Thus, he is manipulating your emotions in order to be awarded favorable action during a domestic quarrel. For instance, by giving blood-curdling yells, our youngest may be seeking a toy with which her older brother is playing. This may require our services as a mediator or no intervention at all.

A Child in Distress (CID) means that your child is in a real predicament or dangerous situation and requires your immediate attention. In these situations, which are not hard to analyze, the child's behavior is related to his physical well being.

Parent in Distress--admittedly, there will be times when you are more vulnerable to, or less tolerant of, childhood infractions. The severity of your disciplinary measures may be dependent upon such factors as how well rested you are or your mental frame of mind.

Parents are prime candidates for "burnout." Supplying the needs of children can be thought of as meeting a certain percentage of daily requirements (like you observe on the labels of cereal boxes) while at the same time providing for "vitamin-enriched" or "fortified" activities. That is, parents are continually faced with the hassles and tensions of child-rearing and get "run-down" from these awesome responsibilities. Therefore, as a means of coping with these daily stresses, it is absolutely essential to get away from your children once in awhile. It is good for your children, revitalizes your energy level and improves your ability to cope.

A Parent is in Command (PIC) when he realizes which of the other three conditions is prevailing and employs effective, appropriate behavior to counteract the situation.

Of course, disciplining children is just not this simple. But the model does help bring perspective to a very complex realm in which variations abound.

14. When children are not doing something they are interested in, expect them to complain, be fussy and irritable. It is difficult for them to share your enthusiasm for a particular adult-type activity. For instance, shopping for clothing with more than one of your children at a time is sure to elicit a number of antics which are indicative of dissatisfaction or boredom whereas spending a day at the amusement park is sure to create fewer behavioral misdemeanors.

15. Another area which creates more problems than we realize is that of bathroom routines, especially in public places. How many times have you been interrupted by your child holding himself or saying, "I have to go to the bathroom?"

Preschoolers simply do not sit around planning when their next "pottie break" will occur. On numerous occasions, our children have charged inside desperate to take care of business. And, the two bathroom functions are viewed quite independently of one another. Our preschoolers do not see the need to coordinate these functions.

To return to my original premise, these thoughts represent an all-star selection of lessons that I have learned about our preschoolers' communicative behaviors. This is not to underrate the importance of other items but these areas seem to "stand out." Fortunately, I have changed my perceptions of preschoolers.

In the final analysis, I like to assess my interaction with our preschoolers as a positive contribution to the following question: "If my children had a choice of parents, would they select me as one of them?"